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TAGS: [MARR PREL PHUM KPKO ET ER EE BORDER UNREST ISLAMISTS](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: MELES SECURITY ADVISOR ON BORDER CRISIS,
INTERNAL UNREST AND ISLAMIC EXTREMISM IN SOMALIA

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b,d)

1 (C) Summary: Prime Minister Meles' National Security Advisor, Muluget Alemseged, told the Charge November 4 that the only way to resolve the Ethiopia/Eritrea border dispute was to normalize the bilateral relationship through a broad package that would emphasize non-border issues and satisfy parents who had lost their children in the conflict. Mulugeta said something positive for Ethiopia must come from the resolution of the issue in order to accept demarcation as mandated by t EEBC. He argued for a comprehensive package that would include new commitments on free movement of people, open trade in goods and service and guaranteed access to port facilities. In the context of normalization of relations, the issue of who gained or lost the disputed town of Badme would assume lesser importance. Mulugeta said that while Eritrea was economically and militarily unprepared for war, President Isaias was inherently unpredictable, so Ethiopia had to prepare for the worst. He described recent Ethiopian military movement as repositioning to cover remote posts UNMEE had been forced to abandon by Eritrea's recent ban on helicopter flights. Concerning Ethiopia's current internal unrest, Mulugeta called protestors a "hooligan army" organized by opposition CU leaders. In response to Charge's complaint of heavy handed tactics, he lamented that Addis police had been overwhelmed and the GOE had been forced to call up the Armed Forces to quell riots; he predicted that or would be restored throughout the country within five days. The PM's advisor also underscored the potential danger of Al Qaeda operatives trained in Afghanistan joining forces with Sharia courts in Somalia, suggesting that Ethiopia's neighbor could become the "next Iraq." End Summary.

2. (C) Charge called on Mulugeta Alemseged, who serves as National Security Advisor to Prime Minister Meles and carries the rank of Minister on November 4 to discuss both the Ethiopia/Eritrean border crisis as well as Ethiopia's internal unrest. Pol/Econ Counselor and post's Defense Liaison Officer joined the Charge.

Ethiopians Long Divided Over How to Deal with Eritrea

3. (C) Mulugeta offered the Charge a historical account of long-standing divisions among Ethiopia's current leadership class on how to deal with Eritrea. He said that some elements of the student movement that had emerged in the 1970's to oppose the Derg regime -- including many current opposition leaders -- had refused to accept Eritreans' desire for independence. Other student leaders, including those who emerged later the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) had committed themselves early on to a referendum to let Eritreans choose their own destiny. On in power after 1991, the TPLF had made good on its commitment to the referendum, at considerable political cost. Mulugeta also emphasized that during its 17 years of armed struggle, the TPLF's views on governance evolved towards multi-party democracy, while President Isaias, who led TPLF's Eritrean allied force, remained authoritarian.

4. (C) The National Security Advisor argued that the subsequent hostility that developed between Ethiopia and Eritrea did not grow out of a territorial dispute, but rather economic issues. Eritrea had wanted a close economic relationship without any real political ties. Mulugeta recalled that in 1998, Eritrea had finally adopted its own currency to replace the Ethiopian birr. The Eritrean government had wanted Ethiopia to exchange the new currency on a one-to-one basis, but the GOE had insisted that market mechanisms govern the exchange rate. Ethiopia had also insisted on commercial letters of credit for trade transactions, which Eritrea could not or would not provide. Acrimony grew, and the Eritrean President had eventually seized upon the border issue as an excuse to attack.

5. (C) The real issue between the two countries now was not Badme, said Mulugeta, but how to achieve lasting peace. Peace must include new understandings on trade, investment, port access, free movement of people and other economic issues. Demarcation was also part of the equation, course, but would not resolve the root problems between the two countries. Mulugeta said that any solution to the border problem must "heal the wounds" of Ethiopians who lost loved ones in the 1998-2000 conflict. Something positive for Ethiopia must emerge from the process. What was needed was a comprehensive package that could only be developed through dialogue. If a package of concrete measures, mostly economic, could be assembled to restore the bilateral relationship to normal -- pre-conflict -- then territorial issues like Badme would seem far less important. Whether a particular village like Badme was on one side of border or the other would matter less to people, and less to both governments. Amb. Huddleston agreed that an Envoy should work to assemble a package like the one Mulugeta described.

6. (C) In response to Charge's question about the GOE's level of concern

about the possible renewal of armed conflict with Eritrea, Mulugeta replied that it was difficult to predict the behavior of President Isaias. The PM's advisor remarked that Eritrea was unprepared to fight both because of its dire economic situation as well as its over stretched military, but that Isaias could still attack anyway. For that reason, Ethiopia had to be prepared for the worst. Ethiopia was not "beating the war drums," but President Isaias was. The GOE had responded to the situation by repositioning military assets that were already at the border in order to cover gaps that the United Nations Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) had been forced to abandon due to the Eritrean ban on helicopter flights. The GOE had not sent new forces to the border. Mulugeta agreed that Ethiopia's current internal unrest might prompt President Isaias to "miscalculate" his chances of successfully attacking Ethiopia, but also emphasized that Ethiopians had always united in the face of foreign invasion.

Charge Calls for Restraint with Opposition Demonstrators

17. (C) Amb. Huddleston expressed concern that the sometimes heavy-handed tactics of GOE security forces in quelling ongoing unrest in the country might breed more resentment and eventually inspire guerrilla resistance against the GOE. She urged that the GOE show more restraint in its efforts to restore order pointing to the story about a woman who was killed when protesting her husband's detention. She also argued that truck loads of armed military with machine guns pointed indiscriminately at vehicles and people going about their normal business was not conducive to restoring order. In fact a process had been started with the election in which Ethiopians believed that they had a right to democracy. If the government used strong arm tactics and failed to provide more opening the process could self-destruct. Mulugeta lamented that riot control units the Addis Ababa police had been unprepared to deal with demonstrations large and spread out as those over the previous week. The GOE has resorted to calling up the Armed Forces, "as any government would do."

18. (C) Mulugeta observed that the opposition's strategy resembled that some student opponents of the Derg regime in the 1970's -- a movement that formed many of the opposition's leaders, though he hastened to add that some current opposition leaders were members of the Derg. That strategy focused on mobilizing street demonstrations and other resistance in Addis Ababa and sought the immediate overthrow of the Derg. Student leaders eventually formed the TPLF, on the other hand, had believed that the Derg was too strong and could only be overthrown with thorough patient, grassroots activity in rural areas, where the Derg was weaker. In the final analysis, the Derg had wiped out urban resistance in a couple of years, while the TPLF eventually triumphed after a 17-year struggle. During that time, TPLF views had evolved toward multi-party democracy and a constitutional rule -- a commitment the EPRDF retained today.

GOE Battling the Opposition's "Hooligan Army"

19. (C) Mulugeta claimed that today's opposition leaders in the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) still hoped for quick results from urban demonstrations, as some of them had sought against the Derg. Rather than working within the democratic process, they had chosen to put it in danger. The GOE had no choice but to safeguard the Constitutional order against what Mulugeta called the opposition's "hooligan army." The National Security Advisor acknowledged that the country's May 15 election had suffered from irregularities, but argued that the EPRDF had unquestionably won a majority. The only question was how large. Every had been surprised by how many seats the opposition had won -- including CUDP leaders themselves -- and their gains had emboldened some in the opposition to "go for the whole cake."

10. (C) The Charge asked whether the GOE had proof that the CUDP was really behind the current street demonstrations. She noted that the party's press statements had merely called for non-violent activities like horn-honking and a strike, but these had immediately turned into violent street action. Mulugeta called the CUDP's public insistence on non-violence a "camouflage." The party had rejected the election result and its leader, Hailu Shawel, had made statements in the U.S. calling for the overthrow of the EPRDF government "by any means necessary." CUDP leaders had also warned during the election campaign that "the people will respond violently if elections are rigged." Mulugeta charged that opposition leaders were not interested in the democratic process and did not want to wait five years for another chance to win. Mulugeta predicted that unrest (Note: which spread to some other cities on Nov. 4. End note would last only five more days.

11. (C) The Charge expressed hope that the GOE would soon restore order. While she believed that the GOE's commitment to democracy was genuine, Ethiopia could see its US assistance reduced, the US Congress was greatly concerned about the violence and several Congressmen had issued statements urging restraint. She asked again that security forces use more restraint, and that the GOE move forward on a dialogue to deepen Ethiopian democracy. Mulugeta agreed, but told the Charge that some EPRDF leader needed time to adjust to the idea of further democratic opening. All of them were still learning about how democracy worked. They were human and there were differences among ruling coalition members' leaders about how to handle the opposition. The Charge said she hoped the EPRDF could learn fast enough to stay ahead of rising popular expectations for democracy.

Need to Retool Somalia TFG to Confront Growing Extremist Threat

12. (C) Mulugeta said the GOE was worried about the increasing presence of Al Qaeda operatives in Somalia. These operatives, who had been trained in Afghanistan camps, wore hoods when they conducted assassinations, and were known as "Dire." Mulugeta said that these terrorists were joining forces with Sharia courts and their militia to press for an extremist Islamic state in Somalia. The GOE hoped to work closely with the USG to address the problem, he added. He said PM Meles was evaluating how the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Somalia might be "revamped" so that it would be better able to confront extremist elements. Mulugeta said that the TFG's prime minister and president were both committed to fighting terrorists, as were some of the other ministers, but some TFG ministers were "soft" on Al Qaeda. He pointed out that terrorist attacks in Nairobi and Mombassa had been planned in Somalia, and concluded that "if we deal with this problem too late, Somalia could become the next Iraq."

HUDDLESTON